

Breast Health Awareness

In one way or another, most of us have come into contact with breast cancer, either by experiencing it through friends or relatives or by having it ourselves. Statistics suggest women are less likely than ever to die of breast cancer, thanks in a large part to the widespread use of mammography. Many breast cancers are spotted at a point when they are considered precancerous or preinvasive. The incidence of “in situ” breast cancer –meaning cancer that is diagnosed “in place” and has not spread from its point of origin to other tissues or organs – has increased considerably over the past twenty years. This increase represents discovery of the disease early and is therefore more curable. Also new biopsy techniques have made tissue sampling more precise and less traumatic. The side effects of various breast cancer treatments have become less debilitating and new drugs have improved survival rates for women with advanced forms of the disease. By knowing our risk factors and being proactive in caring for our own bodies, we can help to be survivors of breast cancer if it happens to us. The following information is taken from the *Harvard Women’s Health Watch, 2004*.

To be at risk for breast cancer means having a greater likelihood of developing the disease. But having one or more risk factors does not mean you will get the disease. Conversely, having no risk factors for breast cancer does not mean you are protected from it. Some of the most common factors are:

- Age – Breast cancer increases gradually as a woman get older, with most breast cancers occurring in women over the age of 50. Eight out of 10 women are over age 50.
- Gender – Both women and men develop breast cancer. However, the disease is far more common in women, whose breasts are constantly being exposed to cycling hormones, particularly estrogen, during the reproductive years.
- Family history – Your risk for breast cancer is doubled if you have a first-degree relative (mother, sister, or daughter) diagnosed with the disease.
- Hormone history – The role of estrogen is not fully understood but the hormone seems to play a role. Starting menstruation at age 12 or before, having no children or having your first child after age 30, and menopause after age 50 are associated with greater cancer risk. Also hormone replacement therapy appears to have increased risk also.
- Weight – Avoiding weight gain during your adult years can help reduce breast cancer risk. Even after menopause, fat tissue produces hormones that are converted to estrogen.
- Physical activity – Research shows a clear benefit especially for postmenopausal women.
- Alcohol – Alcohol has been linked to increased blood levels of estrogen. It may also interfere with the body’s use of folate (a B vitamin) which protects against tumor growth.

However, over 70% of breast cancer cases occur in women who have none of the above identifiable risk factors. Here are some commonly accepted recommendations for early breast cancer detection:

- Women age 40 and older should have a screening mammogram every year.
- Women between ages 20 and 39 should have a clinical breast exam by a health professional every 3 years. After age 40, a breast exam should occur every year.
- Women age 20 or older should perform a breast self-exam every month. By doing the exam regularly, you get to know how your breasts normally feel and you can more readily detect any changes.
- Women with increased risk factors should start regular mammography before age 40.

Like other cancers, the likelihood of surviving breast cancer is dependent on how early it is detected. There is over a 90% survival rate after early diagnosis and treatment. More than 80% of lumps are benign. Don't avoid having a lump checked by a doctor because of fear. The sooner the diagnosis is made and treatment begins is the key to survival.